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Defense says Soviets lead in laser weapons

By Walter Andrews
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The Soviet Union is continuing its military buildup and has a laser-beam space-defense program much larger than that of the United States, the Pentagon said yesterday.

And the Soviet Union has launched a campaign, in concert with the nuclear arms negotiations in Geneva, aimed at maintaining its monopoly on space-defense weapons research and limiting the U.S. "star wars" program, Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger said.

The Soviets already have two ground-based laser systems capable of using highly concentrated light beams to attack the reconnaissance spy satellites of the United States

and its allies, the defense secretary said.

This satellite attack capability is not possessed by the United States, "so, I would say they're well ahead," Mr. Weinberger said. The Soviets also have a prototype anti-aircraft laser weapon in development that could be operational by the late 1980s, he said.

Mr. Weinberger made his comments at a Pentagon press conference called to introduce the 1985 edition of "Soviet Military Power, a booklet compiled by the U.S. intelligence community." The Washington Times published a story Monday based on an advance copy of the 143-page document.

The report also said the leftist Sandinista government of Nicaragua received 18,200 metric tons of military equipment from the Soviet Union and its allies last year, an increase of more than 45 percent compared to 1983.

Included among the shipments were a substantial number of tanks, anti-aircraft guns and armored personnel carriers as well as 10 to 13 attack and utility helicopters.

Mr. Weinberger has previously cited the large increase in shipments as evidence the Nicaraguans are building a military force capable of invading such neighbors as Honduras and El Salvador.

Although the estimate of 18,200 metric tons of arms shipments in

1984 is not new, the report on Soviet military power provided a detailed listing for the first time of exactly what was provided.

It also stated that about 3,000 Cuban military and security personnel are still in Nicaragua, along with 3,000 other Cuban personnel. The Soviet Union, East Germany, Libya, North Korea and the Palestine Liberation Organization each have 40 to 50 military advisers inside the country, the report said.

The Soviet news agency Tass was reported as saying the Reagan administration was using the document to justify "unprecedented military preparations" and called the report "evil-minded slander."

The agency made no comment on the laser developments listed in the booklet.

"I think perhaps most important of all, some of the most important data in the book relates to laser technology," Mr. Weinberger said. "The Soviet Union's high-energy laser program is now much larger than the United States' effort. ... It involves more than a half dozen major research and development facilities and test ranges, and ... it has 10,000 scientists and engineers devoting full time to this project."

The important aspect of the Soviet effort, the defense secretary said, is that it has gone beyond research and moved into the development of prototype laser weapons.

The booklet released yesterday says the Soviets "already have ground-based lasers that could be used to interfere with U.S. satellites."

By the late 1980s, the Soviet Union could have a prototype laser weapon in space for use against satellites and satellite laser weapon in the 1990s, it says.

Testing of components for a large scale, ground-based laser weapons system for defending against ballistic missiles could begin in the early 1990s, the booklet says.

Mr. Weinberger charged that the Soviets are trying at the Geneva nuclear arms negotiations to maintain their "monopoly" on high-energy laser beams and at the same time prevent the United States from proceeding with its own space-defense effort.

He compared the present Soviet posture against the so-called "star

wars" program to their 1983 effort in Europe to prevent the deployment of American Pershing II and cruise missiles to counterbalance the Soviet SS-20 weapons. "The same kind of campaign is under way now," he said.

This was the second warning by an administration official on the Soviet use of the "star wars" issue to frustrate the nuclear arms talks. Edward L. Rowny, special assistant to President Reagan on arms-control matters, warned in a recent speech in St. Louis that Moscow is frustrating progress at the talks by focusing on the issue.

The Pentagon booklet reports that "hardened" command posts have been built away from cities so that more than 175,000 key personnel of the Soviet leadership could safely ride out a nuclear attack. These are in addition to the many bunkers and blast shelters already built in the cities for the general population, the report says.

The report also says both nuclear and conventional forces are being increased by the Soviets.

It notes that the Soviets have often stated their commitment not to be the first to use nuclear weapons. However, the report says, "the Soviets have developed extensive plans either to pre-empt a NATO nuclear strike by launching a massive nuclear attack, or to launch a massive first strike against prime NATO targets should their [non-nuclear] conventional operations falter."

But the booklet also says "the Soviet leadership ... recognizes the catastrophic consequences of

nuclear war" and has a strategy to achieve its objectives without war by using its nuclear forces to instill fear.

The 308 huge SS-18 missiles, each of which carry 10 warheads, can destroy 80 percent of the U.S. Minuteman missile silos by targeting two nuclear warheads against every silo, the report says.

The Washington Times recently reported that the number of warheads on all Soviet ICBMs had grown from 6,300 to 8,500. However, a senior intelligence official who briefed reporters on the document said: "I don't care what forum you put me in, I'd stick by 6,300. Our best evidence gives you that figure."

Mr. Weinberger said the missiles to deliver nuclear warheads are far

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more important than the warheads themselves as a deterrent to war.

"Soviet Military Power" also discloses that the Soviets had begun flight tests of a new, improved, more-accurate version of the SS-20 intermediate range missile, 414 of which have been deployed in Central Europe since 1977.

On non-nuclear, conventional forces, the report says the Soviets have begun to deploy a new M-28 HAVOC, a heavily armed attack helicopter designed to provide close air support for Soviet soldiers on the ground.

It also says the Soviets are continuing to deploy the Mig-29 Fulcrum fighter-interceptor, the first Russian aircraft equipped with a look-down radar similar to the type on the most advanced American planes.